University of Essex

How to write a research project

What is the purpose of this booklet?

Research allows you to discover new ideas and expand your understanding of different subject areas. It will form an essential part of your education, especially as you advance through university. If you've never done any research work, being asked to complete a research project for the first time might seem fairly intimidating. It doesn't need to be, though, and this study guide is designed to make sure that it isn't.

This booklet is a guide to some of the most important aspects of research projects. Whether the project is as small as a research paper or as big as your final dissertation (or bigger!), the techniques covered here will give you the background you need. The examples covered are not exhaustive, but there should be plenty of material to get you off to a good start. Even if you've never done any research work before, if you follow the steps we describe, you'll be able to make a good job of your project, and hand it in on time.

The structure of the booklet is designed to follow the path that you might take through a research project: it starts with a description of a successful research project, then moves on to suggest methods for getting started before getting into finer detail on how to organise your time and find your resources.

Contents

Along with writing, research is one of the most important skills you will need to develop. How good you become at it will determine how successful you are in your studies. Every research project you do will be different, but they will also share some essential common elements. Those elements are laid out for you in this booklet – everything from getting started to ensuring you can get it done. If you follow the suggestions on the following pages your next research project will be more successful and easier to manage.

Making your research S.M.A.R.T.

Before looking at the small print of doing a research project, it's worth taking a moment to try to get a picture of what the ideal research project looks like. The best word to describe it is S.M.A.R.T. It stands for Specific, Measurable, Advantageous, Realistic, Time-framed.

These themes will come up over and over again in different forms throughout this booklet. If they seem like very straightforward concepts, it's because they are – but don't fall into the trap of overlooking or dismissing them. It's difficult to over-estimate just how important they are when it comes to research work.

Specific refers to many things, but for our immediate purposes, it's most relevant to your research question or topic. Be specific about what you're setting out to do, about your topic, and about what you hope to achieve – and try to do this in the earliest possible stages of the project.

There are two reasons why this is helpful. The first is because it will make managing and completing the project much easier. An analogy with shopping can help illustrate what this means. Imagine you're about to go to the store to buy some food. What do you emerge with? Some food, of course, but that could be almost anything – it's far from specific. Now imagine you go to the supermarket to buy bread and cheese. You go in, you know exactly what you want to get, you buy it, and you leave. Easy. This is how specific you should aim to be in framing your research project. Try to set out exactly what you're doing, then do it. It's much easier than trying to figure what you're doing half-way through the project.

The second reason is because it makes it much easier for people to engage with the project. Remember, you have to be able to explain to people what your project is, and how your research is relevant to it. If you're not sure yourself, there's no chance you'll be able to explain it adequately to anyone else.

Measurable is how you keep track of how the project is coming along. It's useful to establish a calendar and milestones for a research project. Not only do milestones give you goals to work toward, they give you something to chart your progress against. If you set them out on a calendar, you'll actually be able to see how you're getting on. This will also help keep you motivated by reminding you of how much progress you've made to date.

Advantageous is what the project ought to be, to you especially. Your project should offer you a positive outcome, and ideally, that should be more than just the mark you hope to receive for it. So what might make it advantageous? You may have an interest in the topic; you might not know much about the topic, but want to learn more; or you might see the possibility of the project leading to something interesting, like a job, entrance to another course of study, or a diploma, for example. There are many potential advantages that you might identify, not just good grades, and it's worth doing so – that'll help reaching the eventual goal of completing the project more attractive.

Realistic. Ask yourself some questions to determine how realistic your goal is: is it possible for you to complete this project to a reasonable standard in the time you have? Are there enough resources? Does the project require you to have any special skills to complete it– and do you have them? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then

your project may need to be reframed. It's important to ask these questions early on, before any complications arise, otherwise you can get caught out. That doesn't mean your project shouldn't be ambitious; it just means that you should keep it in perspective. Your tutor will be able to help you with this.

Time-framed means you can complete the project in the time allocated. If you have one week to get it done, you should schedule your activities and aim to complete it within that week. Likewise for any other length of time you care to name. Time-framed refers to more than just time management, though. Like 'Realistic', it's meant to suggest taking a pragmatic approach to your research project. Don't try to do a month's work in a week: frame your project so that it fits the time you have. And remember, the more work you hope to do, the more time you'll need. Keep this in mind when you're planning your project.

" Choosing a topic that I was interested in was the catalyst to my research! It immediately led to other ideas and as it was a subject I was passionate about, I was even able to visualise how my finished project may look. "

How to start your research project

No matter how S.M.A.R.T. your goals, your project won't be any good if you can't get started. Research projects can be intimidating, especially if it's your first one. That said, even seasoned professionals rely on the occasional trick to get the ball rolling.

Getting started can be the most challenging part for many people, but it doesn't need to be. In fact, it ought to be the easiest. The trick is to be conscious of the things you need to do. If you are, you can make yourself a checklist, and simply go through it.

So what do you need to take into account? Briefly put, these are the things you should have on your checklist: 1) Have an idea, 2) turn that idea into a question, and anticipate new questions, 3) identify resources, 4) establish what has already been done (literature review), 5) brainstorm around focused topic, 6) organise ideas, 7) write outline, 8) start filling in the blanks!

That's all well and good to say, but let's take a moment to explore it in a little more detail.

1. Have an idea. This is the most important step, though it need not be an intimidating prospect. It's even possible that your topic has been assigned to you, in which case you can proceed directly to #3. If you're choosing your own topic, though, how do you start? Well, what, related to your studies, are you interested in? That's the prefect place to start. Now it may be the case that the thing you're interested in is too big for your project, but if you talk to your tutor, they'll probably be able to help you narrow it down.

2. **Turn the idea into a question.** Again, this is easier than it might sound. Ideas can be very big – so big that they're difficult to communicate. One way to help you get around this is to set out to answer a specific question. This allows you to talk about your idea in a focused way that's easier to follow. For example, your idea might be that because we have the technology, all new houses should be environmentally responsible. What you want to do is to convince other people that this is the case. So, you might frame your idea as a question like this: if we have the technology to make all new houses responsible, why don't we?

3. **Identify resources.** Now you're getting into it. Where are you going to find the information to answer this question? This could be the library, the internet (careful, though, there's a lot of nonsense out there – see page 18!), books you have at home, and even your own experiments and discoveries.

4. **Establish what's already been done.** You've done some looking around now. This is called the literature review. Has anyone else looked at this question or similar questions? What did they find? Does it support your ideas, or does it contradict them? You need to record this information to include in your research project, and you need to write down where you found it – you'll probably want to go back and consult it again, and you'll certainly have to put it in your bibliography.

5. **Brainstorm.** Now it's time to get a better picture of *your* project. Take 10 or 15 minutes to write down all the bits of information you've collected. Don't worry about putting them in any particular order, or how important you think they are, just get them down.

6. **Organise ideas.** Once you've got all of those ideas down, collect all the similar bits of information together under up to 5 headings. You can subdivide them later, if necessary. These headings will help you when you come to thinking about writing-up your project. If you can start with similar things in one place, it'll be much easier to make your argument, and much easier for your audience to understand it.

7. **Write your outline.** You're almost ready. Now that you've grouped all the information, you're ready to give it some structure. Put everything together in a clear and easy to follow order. You might want to do this chronologically, or geographically, or by themes – just keep in mind that whatever method you choose, it should be obvious to your eventual reader how it all fits together.

8. **Start filling in the blanks.** There's nothing left to do now but get started!

> **"** When choosing my own topic and question, broader and more diverse research is essential. The hardest thing is not to get too fixated on one aspect, as wider research may reveal more interesting information. **"**

Essex students say...

Caren – Philosophy and Art History
Choosing a topic that I was interested in was the catalyst to my research! It immediately led to other ideas and as it was a subject I was passionate about, I was even able to visualise how my finished project may look. Identifying resources was a little daunting as they were limited. This took longer than I thought, but was worth it. Framing my idea as a question worked particularly well for me. I wrote a list of questions, all based on the same idea, narrowed it down to the one I felt was most suitable and referred back to it which kept me focused. My interest in the subject meant I already had a little background knowledge which gave me a starting block to build on. As I was writing the list, I came up with more ideas and a plan began to develop.

Emma – Sociology
The first step I usually take, once I have a topic, is to carry out an initial topic search on the library database. This provides me with an initial understanding of the material that is available on the topic. Following this, I like to take myself off to the library and spend some time browsing the shelves, sifting through books and seeing what I can find. When choosing my own topic and question, broader and more diverse research is essential. The hardest thing is not to get too fixated on one aspect, as wider research may reveal more interesting information. Creating a comprehensive plan is essential to writing a concise piece of work. If I have fully completed my research then the planning is usually straightforward (with a little bit of time, effort and thought). However, if I'm struggling it is usually a clear indication that I need to return to the books.

Alex – Law
Getting started with a long research project is almost like standing at the bank of a wide river of information. I have to get to the other side to finish my assignment. Having stepping stones really helps me get started. These stepping stones are key words which relate to my assignment. When reading the essay question or case, most of the time I can form at least some idea of how I would like my answer after I have thought about those key words. In the past, I tended not to use online sources in my coursework essays. Google searches rarely did more than scratch the surface, but many libraries now have an excellent selection of reliable online journals. I prefer to have a first draft ready as quickly as possible and then improve it gradually by chipping away at it.

Ruxandra – Psychology
If you know what your goal is everything is much easier. In most cases, the general topic was given to me by a lecturer who then helped me to focus it with my own ideas. I would start with my literature review and after getting my lecturer's advice on a list of books and articles I continued by consulting the library. If you find anything similar to what you want to do but the hypothesis is different, you needn't worry. In the words of one of my lecturers: you can always contradict someone else's findings, provided that you have the proof. That's what makes research fun!

Key issues in project management

When you're thinking about managing the research project you'll probably find that some of the things you're going to be doing are similar to things you were doing when you were starting your project. The five key aspects of managing a research project are: 1) Clarify aims, 2) define activities, 3) identify milestones, 4) establish/define priorities, 5) monitor and evaluate your plan and progress.

1. **Clarify aims.** What is it that you hope to accomplish with your research project? This is not meant to be a stupid question – far from it. Many people start projects without ever thinking seriously about what they hope the end result will be – they just begin reading and writing, hoping that magically a brilliant project will emerge. We don't recommend this! If you're able to determine specifically what you would like your end result to be early on in the project, it will make it much easier to get it finished. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have to know exactly what you're doing from the very beginning. Few people do – that's the nature of research and discovery. If you follow the steps laid out above to get started, though, you'll probably have a reasonably clear picture.

2. **Define activities.** What do you have to do to make sure this project gets finished? What needs to happen? Remember the 'Getting Started' list above. You might need to do some more brainstorming here: write down everything from writing-up, to locations of research material, and how to get to them. Why is it important to do this? Simply because it will allow you to get an idea of what you need to do in order to make your project successful. It will also help you determine what needs to happen right away, and what can wait for a later stage in the project. Do you need to travel anywhere? Are any of your resources only available at specific times? When you define your activities, these things will become apparent to you, and you'll be in a position to plan for them accordingly.

3. **Identify milestones.** Despite the name, 'research project', which sounds like it's just one thing, research projects are made up of a variety of parts and stages: they're very rarely seamless jobs that run from start-to-finish. It's these different stages that we think about when we talk about milestones.

   But how do you go about identifying what your milestones are going to be? Well, it's easier than it might at first appear to be. After defining the different activities that need to take place, it might even become obvious what your milestones are. Perhaps your first milestone is gathering your resources; your second might be to familiarise yourself with all of them and make notes; your third might be to draft an outline; fourth, write section one, and so on.

   Those are all fairly large milestones so it's probably sensible to subdivide them a bit – perhaps even down to a daily level. That might seem like micromanaging, but what it allows you to do is to give yourself a sense that the project is always moving forward. Take the milestone of familiarising yourself with your research material from the example above: let's say you have 15 books and articles to get through. That can be a fairly intimidating pile of work, and by extension, seem a practically unachievable milestone to reach. So break it down into more manageable milestones: 3 books/articles per week, let's say. Then it doesn't seem to be an

impossibly large task and you get a feeling of satisfaction at the end of every week – and on a large research project, that really helps!

4. **Establish and define priorities.** What has to happen first, and what can wait until the end? Are any of your source materials difficult to get a hold of? If so, perhaps chasing those up first should be amongst your highest priorities. Then what? Well, the best way is go milestone by milestone looking at the activities you've identified. Make a chronological list of when things need to happen to allow you to move on to the next stage, then start at the beginning.

Some people think about priorities in these terms: things you *need* to do now, things you *will need* to do, and things you'd *like* to do. As you might expect, that's the order you want to do them in. The things you *need* to do now are urgent. They need to be completed right away before you can move on, so once you've identified them, they are the place you'll need to start. The things you *will need* to do come next. These are the things that will become urgent, but aren't yet. Do these second. The things you'd *like* to do are like rewards. If you want to make sure you complete your research project on time, make sure you don't let these become your highest priority. See the time management section for more tips like this.

5. **Monitor and evaluate your plan and progress.** Your plan is simply what we've discussed above, but it's not enough to have one – you need to stick to it. The best plan in the world won't do you any good if you don't try to keep to it and reach the various milestones set out in it.

It's easy enough to monitor a plan: just look at where you said you were going to be in the plan, and then ask yourself whether or not you're there. Perhaps you've been really enthusiastic about your project and now you're ahead of schedule. That's great – but don't use that as an excuse to take too much time off the project. It can be difficult to build that momentum back up again.

Or maybe you're behind schedule. If you're disciplined about monitoring your plan, this may not be a big deal. You can just jiggle an upcoming stage to make sure you get it done a little quicker, and thereby get yourself back on track. It may be the case, however, that your original plan was too ambitious. If you're good about monitoring your plan from the very beginning this will become clear fairly quickly. At the beginning of the project it's fairly easy to reformulate the plan to make sure you can still bring the project in on time. You don't want to find out that your plan was too ambitious near your deadline, though. That could be disastrous.

> **❝** Research needs to be active – this is how I keep it interesting and exciting. I always consider why I'm reading each book and if it's helpful or relevant: if it isn't, then I put it down and move on. **❞**

Essex students say...

Caren – Humanities and Comparative Studies
I found defining activities an excellent technique for getting a realistic overview of how to manage my research. I began by drawing a timetable with information such as where my research was located and when it was either open or when I could get there. There were also times allocated to 'outside research' which were things like questionnaires or visiting museums and galleries. That gave my research a structure and a sense of satisfaction when I crossed off each milestone. When setting out my research schedule, instead of allowing one day, I would allocate two or three. This was a great stress-buster if life got busy. It meant I could carry on meeting my goals by juggling my timetable for that week.

Emma – Social Sciences
Research needs to be active – this is how I keep it interesting and exciting. I always consider why I'm reading each book and if it's helpful or relevant: if it isn't, then I put it down and move on. Each book or article should give me greater knowledge of the topic, a further argument or a new opinion. If I find that if this is not happening, then I know it is time to ask for help. Milestones are very important, as is setting deadlines for them. This helps me ensure that I have allowed enough time to complete the research and to go back and fill in any gaps if necessary. I always allow myself more time than I think I need – this provides back-up time if necessary or relaxation time if I finish early.

Alex – Law and Management
I found defining priorities during my assignments to be the most important element of managing my workflow. I tend to start collecting my resources at a very early stage, because my classes are quite big and there are many people studying the same thing as me. I start with my primary sources, which I usually need to read and reread primary sources until I've assimilated all relevant information. I also organise secondary sources as soon as I know my research topic because there may not be many copies available in the library. The same will also be applicable for my dissertation next year. Although as this time I am going to answer a question I have set myself, I expect to do research beyond the University's library to lead the project to successful completion.

Ruxandra – Science and Engineering
When it comes to project management, I always have in mind three main aspects: time, resources, and people who may be involved in my research. Out of these, time is the most important one for me. A good, scientific piece of research must have plenty of time allocated to it. Just a week of work would probably not boost the quality of your project. Resources are an important thing to consider while doing your research. The vast amount of resources that you need may pose some problems. One solution is to break it down to smaller categories and to handle one at a time. If you know you need the help of a certain tutor, you must plan ahead to meet him or her and maintain an active relationship with him. Don't forget to always keep an eye on your initial plan to keep you on the right track.

Key issues in time management (self management)

We all have deadlines to work to, so we all have to think about time management regularly throughout the course of our lives. As a result, consciously or unconsciously, we all have some sort of system in place. That is to say, whether or not you are aware of it, you already have a method for managing your time. Chances are though, if you don't know what it is, there's room to tweak it so you can get more time out of the day.

If you're not sure whether you manage your time well, there's an easy way to check. This can be done when you're undertaking a new project, or just to get a sense of how well you use your time in your day-to-day life. Ask yourself the following simple questions:

i. How well does the way that you allocate your time align with your current goals?
ii. What changes might you make to improve that alignment?
iii. What changes are you actually *prepared* to make?
iv. What obstacles might prevent you from making those changes?
v. How can you overcome each of those obstacles?

It's as simple as that. Many people find that once they ask these questions and make themselves conscious of how they spend their time, they immediately find ways to use it more effectively.

It can, however, seem impossible sometimes. Have you ever been in the situation where you have so much to do that you don't know where to start, so you start on the non-urgent tasks because they seem smaller and easier to accomplish? Or, have you ever found yourself cleaning your room or arranging your clothes by colour when you should be revising for an exam? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you probably know what's coming next: It doesn't matter if you complete 5 non-urgent tasks if the most urgent task doesn't get done.

So how can you avoid this? The key to successful time management is planning and then protecting the planned time. A list of daily tasks will focus your mind on important objectives. One especially good way to do this is with the A, B, Cs of time management:

1. At the same time everyday write a to-do-list. First-thing-in-the-morning or last-thing-at-night are popular times to do this, but it is worthwhile experimenting to find the best time for you. Keep your current goals in mind when compiling your list.

2. Prioritise the list using the following method:

   - **A Priority** – it supports a personal/professional goal, is urgent and important, has direct affect on colleagues/family/friends and if not completed today will have serious consequences: an essay due in tomorrow would be a good example.

   - **B Priority** – is important but does not have the same urgency as a type-A Priority. Type-B priorities generally become type-A priorities with time. For example, doing research in the library for an essay due in 3-weeks (type-B now, but over time it will become a type-A priority).

   - **C Priority** – is not important but would be nice to do. Again, this priority could change with time. Type-C list priorities should only be started once the A and Bs have been completed. Cleaning your room, for example, is a type-C priority at exam time.

3. Once you have prioritised your to-do-list give each task a number: A1, A2, B3, etc. Make sure you complete the list in this order (do the As first, Bs second and Cs last). The only exception to this rule is your natural rhythm of productivity, if you know you are not at your most alert after lunch complete a quick C then.

4. When planning your day try not to be over ambitious. Many tasks will take longer to complete than you anticipate, so it is a good idea to try to plan for unexpected tasks should they arise.

5. If a type-'C' priority remains on your to-do-list for more than 2-3 months delete it. It can't be that important.

6. Try to work on one task at a time where possible. This will ensure you are focused on the task in hand.

7. Don't procrastinate. The priority task might seem daunting but getting started is often the biggest hurdle (see the section on getting started on page 5).

Exercise:

Calibrate your internal clock

Close your eyes and start a stopwatch (use your watch or your phone). Open your eyes when you think a minute has elapsed. Don't count in your head: the exercise is about your "internal clock" – your subconscious sense of time. Check the watch when you open your eyes and make a note of the time.

Have you underestimated the amount of time in a minute (0-59 seconds) or overestimated (61 seconds +)? This can tell you a lot about yourself. Extend your conception of time over a whole hour, a day, or even a term. Imagine all those extra minutes you have, or the time you think you have but don't. Does your internal clock tell you anything about the way you like to work, how punctual you are, or your attitude to deadlines? If you overestimated, do you have a tendency to be too relaxed about deadlines? If you underestimated, do you often panic (perhaps unnecessarily) about deadlines and work?

Essex students say...

Caren – Humanities and Comparative Studies

I discovered (the hard way) how to manage my time. I knew that my research project was going to be produced over a longer period of time than an essay so I had to ensure the time scale did not make me complacent. I had made a plan, and I had to make sure that each research task listed for a particular day or week was completed. I learned very quickly that if I decided to get the housework and shopping done first, and then stop for lunch, I had lost a day from my schedule. The housework did not have a deadline attached to it, so it became low priority. The ironing may not have been done, but my research met my personal deadlines! Thinking about doing a difficult task was always worse than actually doing it.

Emma – Social Sciences

I am a big fan of writing lists - partly due to the satisfaction of crossing things off them. I find that writing down tasks is a good way to focus my mind on what needs to be done, and to organise the tasks by priority. However, as long as it is not a life-or-death situation, or that a deadline is missed, I believe that completing my list out of order is really not the end of the world. Similarly, if I know the tasks and deadlines and the level of priority for each, then taking a day off to enjoy myself is, a) not a bad thing, and b) could potentially be beneficial to mind, body and soul, helping me to produce better work in the end. However, the ability to take days off relies upon the fact that I am organised in the first place and that my 'relax-time' is controlled – if the essay is due tomorrow and is not written then it is probably not the best time to be watching TV!

Alex – Law and Management

Good time management is essential for me. From the outset I know that I will first write an initial draft. Then I will chip away at the essay once that draft has been finished. At the beginning of my first year I took a time management course where I was shown a technique to chart my tasks in four boxes: each box represented a different degree of urgency. Box 1 contains the most urgent tasks, Box 2 those with the next lowest degree of urgency and so on. For me this is a great way of staying focused and prevents me from procrastinating. With this technique I can sort according to urgency what would originally have been a long list of different tasks.

Ruxandra – Science and Engineering

The first thing that needs to be done for efficient time management is to create a system that works for YOU, not necessarily for everyone else. I like to write a to-do list for the following days and stick it on post-its all around so that I can constantly be reminded of what needs doing. We've all been in the situation when we are aware that we must hand in a certain paper tomorrow, however we find ourselves checking email, Facebook, Google-ing all sorts of things that have no connection whatsoever with what we're really supposed to be doing. So I set priorities and do not allow myself to jump to the next priority until the previous one is done.

Potential pitfalls in research projects and how to avoid them

This will probably come as no surprise, but when working on a research project there are many potential pitfalls. But what are they, and how can you go about avoiding them? Some of them will be things you'd expect, but others you might not have thought of. Let's take a closer look.

Potential pitfalls and solutions

Pitfall: Lack of planning. It takes time to find and collect the research materials you need. If you're using books, some may be checked-out, and others may not be available on the shelves of your library – maybe you have to travel to get the information you need. You'll need to allow time to make sure you're able to get your hands on them.

Solution: This book has been designed with the express purpose of helping you avoid this pitfall. In the end, whether you plan your project, and how you choose to do it, is up to you. If you're reading this now, there's a fairly good chance you're off to a good start. Hopefully some of the hints and tips contained in here will be useful to you.

Pitfall: Lack of focus. Research projects that are too broad can be difficult to research and write. You'll need to make sure your project is not too ambitious for the amount of time you're given.

Solution: But how do you know, at the beginning of the project, whether it is manageable or not? If you've never undertaken research before, you might feel a bit lost. Perhaps the easiest way to focus your project is to talk to your tutor, or someone who is knowledgeable about research projects, about it. They'll be able to tell you whether or not you're biting off more than you can chew - and, if you are, they can probably help you narrow it down to a manageable size.

Pitfall: Unreliable webpages. The internet is a fantastic resource – but anyone can put anything on it. Make sure you choose sources that are reliable. They should be peer-reviewed. Make sure you evaluate the source of the information, (ie journal, scholarly website, etc.) as well as the authors credentials. Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? You will need to be able to tell the difference.

Solution: The trick to using the internet for research is to know where the information comes from. Did you know that Wikipedia might not be considered a scholarly source when it comes to your assignments? Lots of people begin and end their searches with it, but you need to do better than that for your coursework. What about other sources? Does the author you want to cite have respectable academic credentials? Does the information appear in the pages of a peer-reviewed journal? Did you access the website through the library database? All of these things can help you establish how reliable or unreliable your chosen source is. If you have any doubt, it's probably better not to use the information, or at least to see if you can find a source for it that you know is reliable.

Pitfall: No resources. There is no information for you to support your research project. No other work has been done in the area, or perhaps it's all in a language you don't understand. This can be the unfortunate end of even very promising projects.

Solution: This pitfall is best avoided by careful planning. If you look around at the beginning of your project you should be able to determine just how much information is available to you. It may be the case that you can't find anything at all in this initial search. Depending on how long

you have for your project, you may want to think about choosing something else. Alternatively, you could ask your tutor for advice. Maybe they know of resources in a place you haven't thought to look.

Pitfall: Too little time. Research projects have many facets to them, each of which requires time. Very often, they require more time than the researcher might think. Plan your project carefully, and don't leave it to the last minute.

Solution: As you will have seen in the section on time management, you probably have more time available to you every day than you may have thought. The trick with research projects is to take advantage of it. Start early, and work at it regularly – if you do, you'll probably find you actually have more time than you need. If, however, you are already a master of managing your time and you're still finding that the project is taking longer than you have, there are solutions. It's possible that you set out to do too much, so one solution is to re-evaluate how much it is possible to achieve given the amount of time you have: you may have to reduce the scale of your project a bit. If this is what you think you need to do, you'll need to talk to your tutor to make sure it's ok.

Pitfall: Lack of motivation. Even if you leave your-self enough time, research projects can suffer if you lose motivation. It can be difficult to focus on a single project for a long time – you'll need to make sure you can sustain your motivation.

Solution: You've probably experienced this in other areas of life, and it's not different in research projects: you just don't feel like doing it. How do you usually get around this? Perhaps a similar strategy might work for you in this situation. Or perhaps you want to try something new: if that's the case, there a couple of things you might try. You could, for example, set yourself small deadlines and give yourself

rewards for meeting them: these might be very small to start – like working solidly for 1 hour without checking your email; your reward might be 5 minutes catching up on all the latest news. This method has the potential to increase your motivation in two ways: first, you have a reward to look forward to; second, you have the sense of satisfaction that comes with getting your work done and dusted. It may not sound like much now, but once you get down to it, you'll find that satisfaction is worth quite a lot!

Pitfall: Too ambitious. Know when to draw the line. This is a research project – it's not likely to be the culmination of your life's work. It's not necessarily appropriate or beneficial to try to include every piece of information you find. Just stick to what's most relevant and best supports your argument.

Solution: As enthusiastic as you may be about your topic, you want to keep in mind that it is only a project and doesn't need to cover every aspect of everything ever related to your topic. It's much better to try to cover the most important things well, rather than trying to spread yourself too thinly over everything. It's also much easier to get finished in the allocated amount of time if you keep in mind that your tutor is not expecting the ultimate, definitive book on the subject to emerge from your project.

Pitfall: Too much information. If there is a lot of information available on your project topic, there can be a tendency to get overwhelmed by the amount of it. You'll need to stay focused if this happens and not get distracted by information that's not directly related.

Solution: Many potential research areas have had a great deal of work done on them. What if yours is one of them? Well, to begin, don't panic: you don't necessarily need to read everything ever written about a subject for your project to be successful. It's most likely to be the case that

once you've focused your ideas, some of the information you find, though related, is not directly relevant to your project. Keep your idea focused in your head and allow it to be your guide as you sift through the mountains of information. For example, if your focus is consumer culture in modern British villages, then you can probably shelve that book on consumer culture in ancient Greece. Be selective – you can always read the rest of the stuff when this project's finished.

Pitfall: Intellectual distractions. Inevitably when doing research, you will find new and exciting ideas to pursue. That's a good thing, but it can be detrimental to your project if you give these other avenues of inquiry too much attention and ignore the task at hand.

Solution: This can often be the result of having too much information available to you. There's little doubt that it's all interesting, but do you need to read it now? One of the greatest challenges for anyone involved in research projects can be remaining focused on the project at hand. When you're really involved in your project, it's normal to want to explore all the interesting questions that come up while you're doing research. And there's nothing to say that you can't, but make sure you protect the time you've given over to your research project. This has to be your priority; pursuing the other interesting ideas has to wait. Maybe that could be your reward for a productive day's work?

Pitfall: Boring. Don't pick a topic that doesn't interest you. Try to find something you can really engage with. If your topic is one that you're not enthusiastic about, then it'll be that much harder to do a good job on it… or to get it done on time.

Solution: If you don't find your project interesting, it's unlikely anyone else will, either. That's because your lack of enthusiasm will

translate through your research into the final product. This is easy enough to avoid, though. The obvious way is to choose a topic that you're interested in. If that's not possible – perhaps your topic is assigned to you – then try to find something in that topic that's interesting: can it be related (reasonably) to something that you are interested in? It's also possible that once you start doing some research on your topic, you will find it interesting, so don't discount it too quickly. If however, despite every effort, you are still bored of it, all hope is not lost: try looking for your topic in your everyday life. Sometimes all a topic needs to 'bring it to life' is, well, to bring it to *your* life!

Pitfall: Not original. Not every research project has to redefine the discipline, but you should try to take an original approach in your project. That doesn't mean that you can't rely on work that others have done, but if all your information comes from a single source, what reason is there not to read the original rather than yours?

Solution: It's very often the case that simply starting a project from your own idea is enough to make it sufficiently original. No matter what else has been done, you'll bring your own thoughts and voice to your project, and you'll certainly be looking at several sources. If you're not starting from your own idea (if the topic was assigned, for example) the process of devising your own structure, doing the research and assembling it around the topic will probably do the trick. Be careful that you don't copy from other authors when you do this, though: that's plagiarism. Not only is plagiarised work not original, it is an academic – and criminal – offence to copy other people's work and claim it as your own. Check out our Referencing Skills booklet for more information on how to avoid plagiarism.

Essex students say...

Caren – Humanities and Comparative Studies
Not living on campus meant I had to travel to any research material required for my projects. I started my research straight-away rather than wasting any time, which later proved to be the right thing to do. About half way in, I ended up with piles of books and printouts. At this point I stopped and made a shortlist of what I *really* needed. The technique I used was to create a mind map. I used lots of colour and linked all the themes and ideas which gave me the opportunity to see my project on one page. This was a good way of seeing what fit and the best way to make it flow. Condensing the information kept me focused and motivated. It also allowed me to review and revise my original schedule.

Emma – Social Sciences
The key to any problem concerning research is DO NOT PANIC! Every problem has a solution, but a calm, level head is required to find it. If my planning has gone out the window and there are only a few days before the deadline then it is time to crack on! This is the time for iron-will determination and literally forcing myself to do the work. I like to remind myself in situations like this that it is only an essay, it has to be done, and once it is I can forget about it! I find the online journal database is a fantastic resource and the articles are shorter than books and so more concise and easier to read. The reference section of the library also has some fantastic resources – worth a visit.

Alex – Law and Management
The lack of the right resources was a pitfall when writing my coursework. I sometimes find that I cannot retrieve a source which exactly supports what I would like to say. A certain book might seem to be exactly what I need, but where one author may concentrate a great deal on one thing, another might mention it only briefly. As I am living off campus I often cannot simply return to the library. As a result, I now make sure that I always procure a variety of books on the same subject. As long as I increase my selection of the sources I collect and do not rely on a single source for an idea, I can defuse a potentially frustrating situation.

Ruxandra – Science and Engineering
Not writing more than is allowed in the word count can be difficult. One way I try to avoid this is to plan my paper before starting to actually write it. I think about each section of the project and what I need to say, and then roughly calculate a number of words I have available. For example, I try to keep the introduction to around 800 words, and my abstract should not have more than 120-130 words. Try to plan each section beforehand and to stick to the plan - if you wrote 200 more words than you were supposed to (it may not seem much but if your limit is 3000, you can lose marks!) you will have to go through your paper several times and eliminate whatever you can. But this is both a frustrating and a time-consuming process so I like to try to avoid it.

Resources

The topic of your research project will determine the sorts of resources you need. Unfortunately, that means that you won't find the answer to where you need to start looking in this booklet. If you're stuck, there are a couple of places that are always good places to start. The first is the Library at the University of Essex. On its shelves and in its archives and databases you'll find information on a huge number of topics. You'll also find discipline-specific guidebooks to help you focus your search. Many departments at the University also have their own collections of resource materials. Finding them can be as easy as asking where they are. There are also many other excellent resources such as the British Library, or Google Scholar, and national libraries from other countries. And, of course, you have your tutor. If you get stuck, there's nothing wrong with asking for some guidance. They are experts, and they're always happy to help eager students find their way!

Glossary:

Archive: a repository of information on a subject. Similar to a library, but often containing a more focused collection of research materials.

Bibliography: a list of all source material used in a project, used to allow researchers to give credit to their sources.

Cite: to indicate the source of a piece of information presented in a research paper.

Database: a collection of research materials (often data) accessed by computer, generally online.

Footnote: a method used to provide bibliographic detail about the source of a quotation or piece of information.

Journal: a scholarly publication in which the work of researchers, scholars and academics is presented.

Milestone: a stage to be reached in a research project, very often corresponding to a specific date.

Peer-review: the process by which journal articles are evaluated by other scholars in the same field to ensure that they meet accepted academic standards.

Primary sources: source material, including original documents (diaries, photographs, official records), artworks (music, visual arts, literature), relics and artefacts (built structures, clothing, fossils) that are most closely connected to the topic being studied.

Research: the process of investigating a topic, idea or theory.

Secondary source: information from primary sources collected, interpreted and presented by another author.

Notes

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